

Youth Service for National Development

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

From mentoring children to patrolling public parks or rebuilding schools and houses after a disaster, service programs allow young citizens to affect their communities, gain skills and a sense of accomplishment.

You are in a country with hundreds of millions of youths, so many of them unemployed or underemployed, and one thing they want is to get money so that they can live from day to day, as well as improve their future. How are you going to interest them in doing volunteer community service?

That's one of the tough questions India posed for Susan Stroud, who founded AmeriCorps national youth service organization in the United States.

Her goal now is to spread the idea of youth service as a strategy for national development, for promoting democracy and even for dealing with unemployment. But are young, unemployed people in developing countries willing to give away their time for free? Are young people willing to take a couple of years off from their educational or career paths to work for a minimum wage? What is the incentive?

"I think there are a couple of ways in which youth service can be helpful in that unemployment environment of the type India faces," says Stroud, who was guest of honor at the International Association for Voluntary Efforts conference in New Delhi in November. "It's

difficult for young people to get employment because they don't have a track record of employment. So, for instance, in South Africa, we helped to start some pilot youth service programs years ago for unemployed young people who had been involved in the political struggle; they'd been out of school, out of the employment sector. We created these service programs that, for instance, had them building low income housing in black townships. So they were learning construction skills, to work as a part of the team, to show up and get results by the end of the day. And, that would also help them transition to employment."

Many job training programs focus on skills development, but service programs offer something extra, which helps build more useful, engaged citizens. That extra, Stroud says, is a sense of responsibility and commitment to the community that comes from accomplishing something worthwhile. Also, she says, youth service programs can provide minimal compensation while putting young people to work on useful projects.

"If you think about our own country, in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roose-



Susan Stroud, a lifelong educator, founded the AmeriCorps national youth service organization in the United States in 1994. It has inspired 500,000 young Americans from all social strata to dedicate two years of their young lives to working for subsistence wages in the poorest parts of their nation. With the help of a Ford Foundation grant, she established Innovations in Civic Participation (www.icicp.org), which works with international groups, governments, NGOs and individuals to provide data, resources and ideas on how to empower young people to take action to build up their own communities. The world's youth, aged 15 to 24, constitute the largest cohort ever to enter the transition to adulthood, and nearly 90 percent live in developing countries, says Stroud, shown sharing ideas with young people in Mumbai (below).



Photographs by TASNEEM KALSEKAR

velt's conservation programs were designed to get young people, particularly young men who were unemployed, off the streets into work that turned out to be of enormous benefit to the nation as well as to themselves," Stroud explains. "And they were provided with a certain amount of income and some of that had to be actually sent back to their families. You can't visit a National Park in the United States and not see the legacy that they left behind. They

planted millions and millions of trees; they built most of the National Parks."

The most recent example of this kind of program in the United States is AmeriCorps, which now employs 75,000 people a year, most in their 20s. Many are just out of high school, some are school dropouts, others have PhDs. "The idea is that they work for a stipend that's just below minimum wage and they serve in a variety of ways in the poorest communities in the United

Americans, Young and Old, Volunteer More

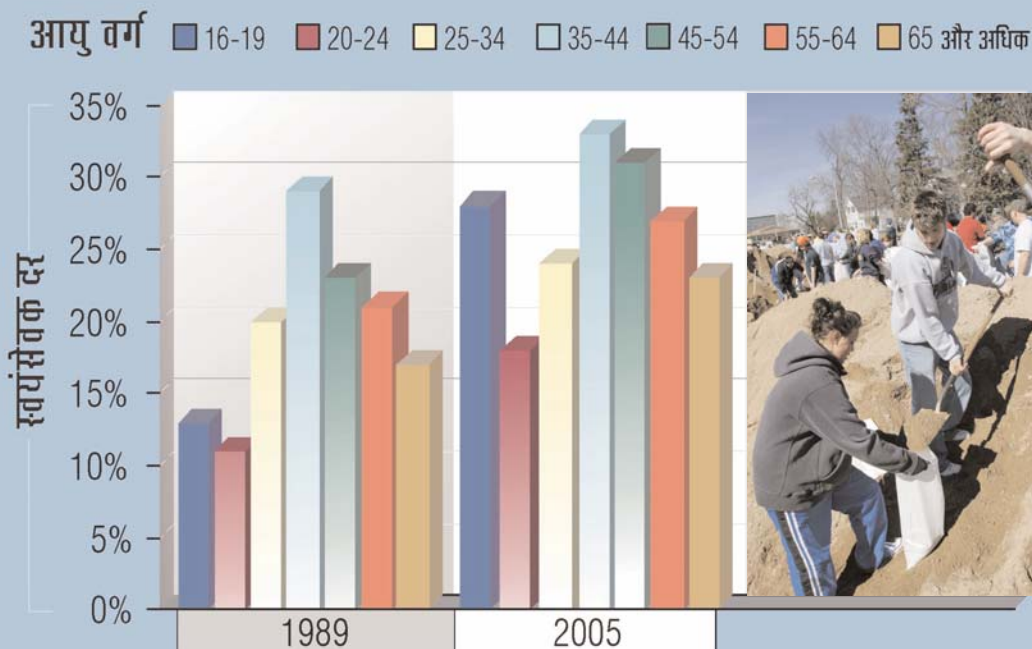
States for a year or two,” Stroud explains. “They are not going to get rich on it but they are provided with enough to actually live on. At the end of each year that they serve they get a voucher for \$4,725, which they can only use for education or training costs, or to pay off college debt.” Many have been involved in relief and rehabilitation work in Mississippi and Louisiana, which suffered from Hurricane Katrina.

While NGOs and individuals can provide the energy and brain power to get models going, see them work and expand, Stroud feels, “If you really want to do something that affects the lives of many more young people you have to have the investment of public resources to do that.

“We need to recognize that there are already programs in India. There’s the National Cadet Corps, there’s the National Service Scheme with 5,000 national service volunteers deployed round the country,” Stroud says. “But why isn’t it a million, given the employment issues, the community needs? Why not mobilize young people to really address this? There are very strong traditions, Gandhian traditions just to name one, religious traditions, the sense of generosity that could easily be built on in terms of creating large scale programs.”

Students from the University of Illinois and the University of Southern Mississippi paint a house in Jackson, Mississippi, for a Habitat for Humanity housing project.

Graphic by OASIM PAZA Source: Urban Institute's National Center on Charitable Statistics



JIM MONE © AP/WIDE

Stroud is hoping to have a conference in South Asia in 2008 to explore in much greater depth what strategies could be adapted for creating more opportunities for young people to be involved in service “with full understanding of what the local traditions are and not by trying to impose some American model.”

Interestingly, Stroud says, volunteers from all backgrounds often give the same answer when asked what they got from the experience.

“These AmeriCorps volunteers end up being studied to death and we ask them this at the end. And we’ve found that, whatever the motivation was for joining, what they say they got was the sense of accomplishment; they say they were able to get something done.” Because this is a very inclusive kind of program, not just targeted for rich kids or poor kids, “a lot of the AmeriCorps members say one of the best things about it was that they met and worked side by side with young people

from very different circumstances than their own, whom they probably would not have met except for this kind of experience,” says Stroud. “So this type of program has the opportunity to help bridge some of the divides in our societies, of class, race, education.” In other words, a youth service program can help build democracy and make a better society.

“When young people can look at their work, the change that they’ve helped to create, it gives them a very different sense of themselves, of what they are capable of,” says Stroud. “They can say, ‘We planted these many trees, we’ve cleaned up this stream.’ For some young people, who had never been asked to take responsibility, never thought that they were capable of responsibility, it can be a really transforming experience, really powerful.”

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